

MOONBURST NEWSLETTER

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A Quarterly Newsletter on Lesbian Ex-Lovers

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Carol S. Becker, Moonburst Press, P.O. Box 21338, Oakland, CA 94620



Unbroken Ties: Lesbian Ex-Lovers

Alyson Publications, Inc., 1988
217 pages, 5 7/16" x 8 1/2", \$7.95
ISBN 1-55583-106-0

by

Carol S. Becker, Ph.D.

This newsletter provides a discussion format for lesbian breakups and relationships. The questions are ones that people have asked me as I've given talks around the nation on my book on lesbian breakups and ex-lovers. This issue of Moonburst also includes a readers' comments column--responses I received from the last newsletter. Aside from the readers' comments, the opinions and thoughts expressed in the newsletter are my own. My comments are not intended to substitute for professional assistance of which the reader is in need. I do not mean my general and specific remarks to be applied, uncritically, to unique lives and relationships.

READERS' COMMENTS

Dear Carol,

Your book and newsletter have been incredibly helpful to me during this most difficult time in my life.

Thank you,
Sandra

Dear Carol,

Six months ago, I bought your book, Unbroken Ties, suggested to me by my ex-lover. She told me my "fear of intimacy" perpetuated an unhealthy environment she would no longer tolerate, and ended our two and a half year relationship. Nothing could prevent the pain and confusion I felt during the initial stage of the breakup, but the isolation ended when I began reading about other women's experiences. This third person perspective afforded me the detachment I needed in order to investigate emotional dimensions without dwelling on my personal hurt. Your reflective comments gave clarity and organization to their stories.

Today my heart still skips a beat when I run into my first lover and we briefly converse, but I've come to understand and accept the past relationship for what it was. I'm also coming to terms with understanding my own feelings by attending my first Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings. Thank you for sharing and being a part of my healing and recovery.

Rebecca

Dear Carol,

I love the newsletter. Here's my comment.

I get angry when my lover--who is a big-time lesbian, while I am a relatively new one--uses her "superior" knowledge of lesbian ethics to justify her desire to rebuild a friendship with an ex-lover. I am tolerant and even like one of her three ex-lovers, but I am jealous of my most recent predecessor, a younger woman who left my lover for another woman. My lover says that her concern for her ex-lover is one of those things that make lesbian relationships so special and that my jealousy is a "het game." My guts tell me that she is answering me with a "more lesbian than thou" trip, and that she is not being honest with herself as to her motives.

Ksenia Lake

Send your comments to **Moonburst Newsletter** so that other lesbians can benefit from your experiences. Help us learn from and encourage each other.

QUESTION: What can I do when I'm still attracted to an ex-lover?

ANSWER: Generally, it's helpful

- to acknowledge the feelings you're having
- to talk about them with people you trust
- to remind yourself how the lover relationship wasn't working for you
- to understand the hopes and longings that are the basis of your attractions

Specific issue arise if the attraction is mutual and you broke up because the relationship was unhealthy for one or both of you. Then, you have to find ways of setting boundaries as non-lovers and of anticipating situations that tempt you to slip back into being lovers. Talking about the attraction as well as the reasons a relationship didn't work can help ease the pressure of the attraction. Not talking about the attraction but affirming the boundaries and the affectional ties between you as ex-lovers can also help. If you find that you act on the attraction and then regret it, you should ask yourself what you're trying to avoid by not getting on with the changes you know are good for you. You may be using the attraction to avoid some difficult parts of yourself (e.g. sadness, loneliness, grief).

Other issue are focal when the attraction isn't mutual. While this is safer, it's also more painful. In this situation, it's helpful to discover what the attraction says about you. How did the lover relationship affirm your sexual and emotional relationships with yourself? Did the breakup leave you feeling badly about yourself, sexually and emotionally, and are you

hoping that your ex-lover's love for you will make these hurts go away? The attraction can be a helpful expression of grief. If it displaces grief, it may be a way of avoiding the loss of the relationship.

QUESTION: When should I keep working on a lover relationship, and when should I let it go?

ANSWER: There isn't a clear time limit for when to stop working on a troubled and unsatisfying relationship. We each have different tolerances at distinct points in our lives. This is a unique decision for each of us. When our partner gives up on the relationship before we're ready to do so, it compounds our pain. Here are some ideas that I hope will be useful.

Spend some time thinking about the following six questions:

1. What is the heart of a lover relationship for me?
2. What's missing in my current relationship and how important is it to me?
3. Is there anything else I can do to make my current relationship more satisfying to me?
4. Can I get some of what's missing from non-lovers in ways that will strengthen my lover relationship?
5. How can I change to make this relationship work better?
6. Are the changes I want my lover to make really possible for her?

Most of us are willing to endure great discomfort if we think things will improve. In general, I think that a relationship is still viable

a. when it's still pleasurable and enjoyable. It's important to get some pleasure from a relationship while you're working on improving it. If you're putting in a lot of hard work and not getting any enjoyment back, maybe you should reevaluate. Putting off fun and contentment until later may be mature, but it can undermine a lover relationship. Giving too much without getting enough back is a dubious interpersonal habit.

b. when it's improving. It's hard to know if we are resolving problems or if we're staying stuck in them. We want to experience progress as we work on a relationship; that we're moving through difficulties, that we're more satisfied than previously, and that the relationship is expanding rather than constricting us. Sometimes we sense improvement prematurely. Sometimes we think that we're spiraling out of dilemmas when we're only circling through them without changing. Try to be honest about what you experience. Friends can give you their impressions, but you are the only one who can decide if there is improvement for you.

c. when it's a vehicle for your personal growth. Much of our emotional growth is sparked by intimate relationships. We show our best and worst sides to our lovers. Often, old fears and inadequacies surface as we deepen and lengthen a lover relationship. We can learn

about vital parts of ourselves by struggling over difficulties with our lover. We can also reopen and heal old wounds that have been weakening our emotional vitality and resiliency. Before leaving a relationship, try changing in desired ways. Instead of leaving a relationship and changing, try using the current relationship as an entryway to personal growth.

QUESTION: I've recently become single and my coupled lesbian friends seem nervous around me. Everyone is pushing me to meet someone and to date. I'm not ready, what can I do?

ANSWER: First, try to understand what being single means to you, to your friends, and to your community. Once you clarify these meanings, solutions will follow.

When a couple breaks up, the breakup reverbrates through the women's friendship networks. The reasons for a breakup are often issues with which other couples have struggled, and anyone's breakup can reactivate them. Old dissatisfactions, hopes, and fears can surface and disturb couples' equilibriums. The availability of two new potential partners, can threaten the stability of even slightly unsatisfying relationships. When two women give up their partnership to grow and change individually, it can reawaken a sense of adventure and a desire to be more independent in everyone. These changes can force lesbians to focus on their relationships and to enliven them. But lovers can feel defeated by unresolved problems and this can threaten the partnership.

Lesbian communities have explicit or implicit prescriptions for behavior. Often there are pressures to show you are mature and happy by being with a lover. Women value intimacy and want everyone to have it. And each of us has our own negative feelings about being alone. When we end a lover relationship--even when it's what we want--we struggle with feeling that we failed, that we're unlovable, that we're abnormally different, and that we'll never find a satisfying relationship. These self-doubts make it difficult for us to be single. More than ever, we need the support of our friends and community.

Once you have clarified the meanings of your singlehood to yourself and your friends, it will be easier to relieve the pressure to date. It will help, too, to talk to other single lesbians about the tensions and problems of being single and to share insights and solutions. After making sure that you don't have hidden sexual or romantic motives, pursue friendships with coupled friends whose partnership you support. Validate the couples' relationships and keep the sexual and emotional boundaries clear. Make a supportive friendship network your first priority. Clarify some goals you want to achieve by being single and start making them happen.

QUESTION: What are some of the problems I might create if I begin a new lover relationship before I end the old one?

ANSWER: The most obvious problem is trying to simultaneously handle two significant relationships, one that is ending and one that is beginning. Caught between the two--without time and energy to devote to both--it's likely that you won't concentrate on understanding and experiencing the breakup.

When you begin a new relationship before finishing an old one, you're likely to get caught in a triangle that squeezes you out of time to be with yourself. The old lover wants you to talk about and settle the details of the breakup; the new lover wants you to set limits with your ex-lover and find time for the new relationship. You may find yourself running from person to person to avoid both women being angry at you. If you find yourself handling external pressures like this, it could be a sign that you're avoiding internal issues and feelings by cultivating relational crises.

Sometimes we jump from one partner to another so that we don't feel the disappointment and hopelessness of a relationship ending. Instead, we find new hope in the excitement and pleasure of fresh love. It's easier to look ahead to a sunny future than to review a gloomy past. But if we run away from the problems we didn't resolve in an old relationship, they're likely to occur again in our new relationships.

Right now it may feel good to avoid feeling angry, hopeless, sad, lonely, and needy, but not feeling these things may hurt you in the long run. Experiencing these parts of yourself may be vital to your emotional growth and happiness; their integration may be necessary to maintaining satisfying, long-lasting relationships. Ask yourself what didn't work in the old relationship. How did you contribute to these problems becoming unsolvable ones? Remember the happy beginning of the old relationship. Did you notice potential problems even then but avoided taking them seriously? Review the problems of the old relationship and think about what you could do differently if they occurred again. Identify relationship issues that generate disappointment and hopelessness for you.

You can apply these patterns to your new relationship without ruining its fun and excitement. Notice what you enjoy about your new lover, what your dreams are for the relationship, who you hope you can be with your new lover. Based on your past experience, how can you insure the success of this relationship? Talk about your first fears and irritations with your partner and with friends. If necessary, seek professional help to effectively deal with these problems while they are still small ones. Ask friends if they see any similarities between your new relationship and previous ones. If patterns keep occurring you'll eventually notice and want to change them.

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QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED IN THE JULY ISSUE OF MOONBURST

Are first lovers the hardest to get over? How do we stop making comparisons?

How can I avoid getting enmeshed in jealous triangles with my lover and her ex?

Can lending large sums of money to a lover ruin a relationship?

I still pine for my ex-lovers, seek out women who refuse to date me, and am not attracted to women who ask me out. What can I do?

If not being together is healthy, why does it hurt so much? How can I avoid the trap in my mind that keeps saying we should be together?

For a one year subscription to the Moonburst Newsletter (four issues) send \$6.00 (U.S. Currency) to Carol S. Becker, P.O. Box 21138, Oakland, CA 94620.

Carol, please answer this question in a future newsletter:

Blank lined paper for writing.

Send a free introductory issue of the Moonburst Newsletter to:

- _____ Recovering From a Lesbian Breakup
- _____ Friendships Between Lesbian Ex-Lovers
- _____ Using a Lesbian Breakup to Strengthen Lover Relationships

My name and address: _____

Ship me _____ copies of Unbroken Ties: Lesbian Ex-Lovers. I have enclosed \$7.95 for each book, plus \$1.50 postage for the first book and \$.50 for each additional one. California residents add \$.56 sales tax per book. My name and address:

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